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CUBA:

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The Plot to Kill Castro

In some ways, last week's trial of seven Cubans accused of plotting the assassination of Fidel Castro was reminiscent of the flamboyant circus justice meted out in the early days of the Cuban Revolution. Now as then, trial was by military tribunal in La Cabafia fortress, and the state prosecutor was the same Jorge Serguera, who in 1959 laid out cases against hundreds of Batista henchmen, most of whom were summarily convicted and marched out to a firing squad.

This time, however, the defendants were former friends, not former enemies, and, thanks to Castro himself, they faced jail rather than the firing squad. When the Maximum Leader's letter asking for leniency was read to the court, the entire audience of 500 got to its feet to cheer. Seven years ago, the mobs who witnessed the court-martials interrupted the proceedings constantly with cries of "Kill them! Kill them!"

The chief defendant in the trial was Maj. Rolando Cubela, 35-year-old director of a large Havana hospital. A hero of Castro's guerrilla movement and, until his arrest, a top-ranking officer in the Cuban Revolutionary Army, the stocky, baldish Cubela was nonetheless an unlikely central figure for an unlikely plot.

As Cuban Intelligence told it, Cubela began his defection in Paris in late 1964 and sealed it two months later in a Madrid apartment where he met with American CIA agents and Cuban exile leaders, including Manuel Artime, a leader of the aborted Bay of Pigs invasion. According to the indictment, Cubela was given a high-powered rifle with telescopic sights and instructions to shoot Castro from a window vantage point, then flee the island in a waiting boat. Artime, meantime, would land an invasion force and take over a stunned, leaderless Cuba.

Sordid Business: Unhappily for Cubela, however, the timetable for the plot went awry—partly, so the story went, because of the Dominican crisis and partly because the assassination weapon didn't work. And eventually Cuban Intelligence got wind of the scheme—whereupon Cubela and his fellow conspirators obligingly confessed to the whole sordid business. (No confession, however, was forthcoming from the U.S. Government, whose spokesmen, when asked last week about alleged CIA involvement, contented themselves with "No comment.")

When they heard Castro's plea for clemency read to the court, Cubela and his co-defendants burst into audible sobs.



Castro: A plea for clemency

Ramón Guin drew 25 years apiece while three other defendants got from ten to twenty years. (The remaining two were let off entirely.)

This relatively generous treatment of the prisoners was interpreted by some as a show of strength on Castro's part. But others thought that the fact the trial was held at all was a sign of basic insecurity within the Cuban Government. And to buttress their point of view, these observers pointed to several recent incidents in which Castro's guards have nervously fired on innocent passers-by, apparently under the impression that they, too, were would-be assassins.

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